

Pelagic seabirding off Cape Town, South Africa

Callan Cohen^a, Claire Spottiswoode^a and Barrie Rose^b

Une abondance et diversité extraordinaires d'oiseaux marins se trouvent au large de la côte sud-ouest de l'Afrique du Sud, dues aux eaux glacées du courant Benguela, provenant de l'Antarctique et riches en nutriments. Lorsqu'on s'approche d'un chalutier au-delà de la plaque continentale au large du Cap, l'on peut régulièrement voir à grande proximité plus de 10 000 oiseaux marins comprenant jusqu'à 30 espèces, y compris des milliers d'albatros comprenant jusqu'à sept espèces. Par ailleurs, la péninsule du Cap est l'un des meilleurs sites du monde pour l'observation des oiseaux marins à partir du littoral, et offre également plusieurs espèces côtières endémiques.

Approaching a fishing trawler off the continental shelf near Cape Town is a birding experience that remains engraved in the memory forever. The opportunity to see thousands of albatrosses of up to seven species just an arm's length away is luring increasing numbers of birders to Africa's southern tip. Day trippers in winter regularly see over 10,000 seabirds of up to 30 species, making it arguably the world's most mind-blowing yet accessible seabirding experience. Furthermore, if you are a hardened seawatcher (or a weakened seafarer!), the Cape Peninsula also offers some of the world's best land-based seabirding. In addition to the petrels and albatrosses that flash beyond the waves in blustery conditions, the coastal areas hold endemic specialities such as Bank *Phalacrocorax neglectus* and Crowned Cormorants *P. coronatus*, migrant Antarctic Terns *Sterna vittata* in winter, and even a chance of Greater Shearwater *Chionis alba*.

The Cape's amazing seabird abundance and diversity are products of the Benguela current that originates in the icy waters of Antarctica. Surging up the west coast of southern Africa, the nutrient-rich waters cause upwellings along the continental shelf, nurturing a profusion of ocean life that supports both a lively fishing industry and vast numbers of seabirds. Pelagic species congregate around the trawlers, making them easy to locate and approach. The high point of a pelagic birding trip is trailing behind a trawler with up to 5,000 birds squabbling for scraps in its wake. The diversity of seabirds is highly seasonal, so consult the monthly table (below), compiled from over 300 pelagic birding trip lists during the past ten years. This will help you to decide when best to go in order to maximise the chances of seeing your most-wanted species. Note that seabird numbers fluctuate from year to year, and that birding in the vicinity of a trawler will make a huge difference to your trip.

Winter trips

Winter (May–September) is the most spectacular time at sea. Huge numbers of albatrosses and other pelagic seabirds migrate northwards from their breeding sites as far south as Antarctica, moving into Cape waters to escape the harsh polar winter. Shy *Diomedea cauta* and Black-browed Albatrosses *D. melanophrys* are abundant, and both subspecies of Yellow-nosed Al-

Captions for plate on page 13:

1. Yellow-nosed Albatross *Diomedea chlororhynchus*, subspecies *chlororhynchus*. Recent advances in albatross taxonomy suggest that this Southern Atlantic form is likely to a distinct species (Bruce Dyer)
2. Pelagic seabirds attracted to a trawler at the edge of the continental shelf off Cape Town. Recent trips here have encountered seven albatross species on a single day (Claire Spottiswoode)
3. Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria (aequinoctialis) conspicillata*. The diagnostic white facial crescent separates it from White-chinned Petrel *P. aequinoctialis* only at close range, and care must thus be taken not to confuse it with occasional White-chinned Petrels that show white patches on the head (Peter G. Ryan)
4. Few sights epitomise the freedom of the open oceans as elegantly as a soaring Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*. However, a disturbing percentage of the world population may be lost to longlining each year (M. P. Kahl Percy FitzPatrick Institute, UCT)
5. Pintado Petrel *Daption capense*. The flashy 'Cape Pigeon' is one of a host of Southern Ocean species that move north to Cape Town during the austral winter (Ross Wanless)
6. Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, vultures of the southern ocean, often scavenge on dead seals. (Ross Wanless)
7. Crowned Cormorant *Phalacrocorax coronatus*. This striking endemic is one of three cormorants that are only found in western coastal areas of southern Africa (Callan Cohen)
8. A Greater Shearwater *Chionis alba* on the Cape Peninsula. Vagrant birds from Antarctica are found almost annually in winter (Callan Cohen)



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batross *D. chlororhynchos* are commonly seen in small numbers.

Recent research on albatross taxonomy, based on molecular analysis and embracing the Phylogenetic Species Concept, has suggested that there are ten unrecognised species of albatross in the world. These tentative 'new' species are currently classified as subspecies, but should they be recognised as full species, the global albatross species total would rise from 14 to 24. In this article and the seabird seasonality table, the proposed 'new' species that can be distinguished at sea are treated separately to draw attention to these taxa. In particular, pelagics off Cape Town are the most accessible place globally to see the Atlantic 'grey-headed' *chlororhynchos* subspecies of the Yellow-nosed Albatross (see photo). There is also always a chance of seeing the rare Royal *D. epomophora* and Grey-headed Albatrosses *D. chrysostoma*.

The prize of a winter trip must however be the Wandering Albatross *D. exulans*, which has become scarcer in recent years. Research is demonstrating that the comparatively recent advent of longline fishing techniques is causing a tragic number of deaths among Southern Hemisphere seabirds. Fishing lines as long as 100 km, studded with up to 20,000 baited hooks, are trailed behind fishing vessels. It is estimated that a staggering 100 million hooks each year are set in the southern ocean alone. As the line is lowered into the water, but before it sinks very deep, seabirds following the boat plunge down to grab the bait, become ensnared and drown. Research estimates suggest that as many as 40,000 albatrosses are killed annually, a disturbing figure which is causing population declines in several species. These declines are potentially devastating, especially among the long-lived Wandering Albatross, a species which only raises one chick every two years. Wandering Albatross is now rare on the fishing grounds, where up to 40 could be seen attending a single trawler in the 1950s. Currently, the Global Seabird Programme of BirdLife International and other concerned parties are investigating ways of reducing this seabird mortality. Visit www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/seabirds for further details.

On a more positive note, a number of winter trips last year encountered all of the above seven albatross taxa on a single day: Wandering, Royal, Shy, Black-browed, Grey-headed and both subspecies of Yellow-nosed!

The ever-present White-chinned Petrels *Procellaria (a.) aequinoctialis*, Sooty Shearwaters *Puffinus griseus* and Cape Gannets *Sula capensis* are joined by huge numbers of flashy Pintado Petrels

Daption capense. Broad-billed Prions *Pachyptila vittata* (subspecies *desolata* is the most common) and Wilson's Storm-Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*. Both Northern *Macronectes halli* and Southern Giant Petrels *M. giganteus* are invariably present in small numbers, usually one or two per trawler, and even the Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* makes an occasional appearance. The rare Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria (aequinoctialis) conspicillata* could be encountered at any time of year. The 'Ringeye', as it is more affectionately known, was only recently split from White-chinned Petrel. (This taxonomic decision, based largely on the breeding calls, bestows upon it the dubious distinction of being one of the world's most threatened seabirds, breeding only on Inaccessible Island in the South Atlantic Ocean. Alarmingly, it is believed that as much as 5% of the population is killed annually by longline fishing off Brazil.) Watch out for the occasional fast-flying Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis* whipping by, especially away from the trawlers. Small flocks of terns, including Antarctic Tern, fly by in coastal areas, and Subantarctic Skuas *Catharacta antarctica* are invariably in attendance at every boat, and are often seen even before leaving False Bay.

Summer trips

From October to April, North Atlantic seabirds migrate south to claim their share of the Benguela's bounty. Although seabird numbers are generally lower during this period than in winter, summer trips are spectacular nonetheless and provide an opportunity to see several additional species.

The three most common albatrosses, the two giant petrels (uncommon), White-chinned Petrel and Sooty Shearwater are always present. They are joined in summer by Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* (mainly the nominate subspecies *diomedea*, sometimes known as Scopoli's Shearwater) and Great Shearwater *P. gravis*, along with smaller numbers of Soft-plumaged Petrels (early summer), the occasional Spectacled Petrel and Manx *P. puffinus* and Flesh-footed Shearwaters *P. carneipes*. The majority of Great-winged Petrels *Pterodroma macroptera* make their appearance only at this time, having spent the harsh Antarctic winter at their breeding grounds further south. Significant numbers of European Storm-Petrels *Hydrobates pelagicus* join the ever-present Wilson's Storm-Petrels. White-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta grallaria* is present only in small numbers, as a passage migrant, in late September/October and again in April.

In Cape waters, Leach's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* is mainly seen only far offshore beyond the continental shelf, and it was hence assumed to be an exclusively non-breeding migrant from the Northern Hemisphere during our summer months. However, this species was discovered as recently as 1997, by Phil Whittington, to be breeding on Dyer Island off the Cape's south coast, making it the only pelagic seabird breeding in sub-Saharan Africa. Up to 20 pairs breed on the island annually, and can be heard calling at night from their nesting burrows deep in the old stone walls that surround the island's few buildings.

The common Arctic *Stercorarius parasiticus*, uncommon Pomarine *S. pomarinus*, Subantarctic and very scarce Long-tailed Skuas *S. longicaudus* patrol the skies closer inshore. Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* is a passage migrant, although it is seen in smaller numbers throughout the summer, along with Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini*. Lucky observers may see small flocks of Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*.

Rarities and the legendary 1984 season...

For local birders it is the lure of local rarities that makes pelagic trips so popular. Almost anything can turn up, including the following rarities recorded in the Western Cape, characteristically in winter: (Southern) Royal Albatross *D. e. sandfordi* (four records at sea), Buller's Albatross *D. bulleri* (one record at sea), Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria fusca* (two confirmed records at sea, two from land, ten washed up dead on beaches), Light-mantled Sooty Albatross *P. palpebrata* (two confirmed records at sea, three beached), Antarctic Petrel *Thalassodroma antarctica* (two beached), White-headed Petrel *Pterodroma lessonae* (two at sea, one beached), Atlantic Petrel *P. incerta* (very scarce, no figures available), Kerguelen Petrel *P. brevirostris* (very scarce, except in 1984), Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea* (very scarce, except in 1984), Thin-billed Prion *Pachyptila belcheri* (very scarce, except in 1984), Fairy Prion *P. turtur* (one beached), Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea* (very scarce), Little Shearwater *Puffinus assimilis* (scarce), Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* (two at sea, one on land) and South Polar Skua *Catharacta macormicki* (scarce). Rarities seen in summer include White-faced Storm-Petrel *Pelagodroma marina* (very scarce) and Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis* (one at sea).

In July 1984 a remarkable seabird irruption occurred from Australia and New Zealand to South Africa. This was possibly linked to the El Niño weather conditions prevailing during the previous

season and was associated with many beached seabird corpses. There were sightings of birds ordinarily very rare at sea, including large numbers of Kerguelen Petrel, Blue Petrel and Slender-billed Prion. The most bizarre record was surely that of the dazed Dark-mantled Sooty Albatross found atop an apartment block in suburban Cape Town!

Organising a pelagic trip

Reasonably priced day trips, led by experienced local leaders and using radar to detect and approach trawlers on the continental shelf, 30–40 km offshore, depart from Simon's Town and Hout Bay harbours at least once a month (more often in winter and spring). Conditions may turn fairly rough, especially during winter, so be sure to bring anti-nausea tablets if you are prone to seasickness. Please contact the authors for an update on the constantly changing pelagic birding trip details. A centralised Pelagic Booking Service has been formed to accept bookings for all the major pelagic operators (visit www.capetownpelagics.com or call +27 21 683 1898 for further details).

Seawatching from the Cape Peninsula

Those who don't trust their sea legs may consider taking their telescopes out on a windy day and gazing out to sea to search for pelagic seabirds that are blown inshore. Although the popularity of this pastime has declined recently due to the increased availability of pelagic birding trips, there are still some sites worth visiting on the peninsula if you are a hardened seawatcher.

In winter seawatching is best on the western side of the peninsula when a strong north-westerly is blowing. Try to find a position elevated enough to preclude your quarry dipping infuriatingly behind the wave troughs, and if possible sheltered from light rain squalls. The best spots are at the Cape of Good Hope (find a sheltered vantage point on the cliffs above the parking area), and Cape Point (take the path from the old lighthouse to the new one), in the Cape of Good Hope reserve, and the village of Kommetjie (from the shore near the lighthouse), on the peninsula's Atlantic seaboard. Even the casual seawatcher is bound to see a sprinkling of Cape Cormorant, Cape Gannet, White-chinned Petrel and Sooty Shearwater just offshore. If there is a strong wind, Shy and Black-browed Albatrosses may also be seen, with regular appearances made by Subantarctic Skua, Northern and Southern Giant Petrels, Yellow-nosed Albatross, Wilson's Storm-Petrel and Broad-billed Prion.

Table 1. Seabirds off the Cape. A monthly seasonality table for all regularly occurring species based on over 300 pelagic trips over the last ten years. The colour codes refer to the percentage chance of encountering each species. Table taken with permission from *Essential Birding—Western South Africa: Key Routes from Cape Town to the Kalahari*. Cape Town: Struik Publishers



In spring, summer and autumn, the persistent south-easterly winds produce good seawatching, and the best vantage points are Glencairn and Cape Point. Glencairn, made famous by dedicated seawatcher Mike Fraser, is a small suburb on the east coast of the Peninsula, between Fish Hoek and Simon's Town, and the best vantage point here is the whale-watching site 1 km north of the railway station. The seawatching is best in spring and late summer (October and February–March), on the first or second day of the south-easter. Birds are blown into False Bay and are best viewed in the late afternoon as they move south, out of the bay. Most common are Cape Gannet, Arctic Skua, Sooty Shearwater and White-chinned Petrel. Less common but regular nonetheless are Pomarine Skua and Cory's Shearwater; scarcer still are Soft-plumaged Petrel, Great Shearwater and Long-tailed Skua.

In summer, scan offshore from the Mouille Point lighthouse (just west of Cape Town's Victoria and Alfred Waterfront), for distant flocks of Sabine's Gull (October–April), as well as Cape Gannet, White-chinned Petrel, Arctic Skua and Swift Tern *S. bergii*.

Coastal birds

Cape Town hosts several coastal species endemic to southern Africa, most of which are fairly common and easy to find close to the city. The three endemic species of *Phalacrocorax*—the common Cape Cormorant *P. capensis*, Crowned Cormorant and the much scarcer and threatened Bank Cormorant—are easily seen at the seaside village of Kommetjie, on the west coast of the Cape Peninsula and 30 minutes south of Cape Town. African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini*, another coastal species under threat and currently subject to intensive monitoring, is fairly common along peninsula shores and is invariably present at Kommetjie. This is also a classic site for Antarctic Tern; a small flock roosts here each winter, from April to early October. Winter is also the best time to enquire if there is a Greater Shearwater in the area, as vagrants (probably ship-assisted) regularly turn up on the Western Cape's Atlantic seaboard.

The now famous Boulders Beach African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* colony at Simonstown on the southern Cape Peninsula is another obvious destination, and also holds African Black Oystercatcher and Crowned Cormorant. Further afield, on the West Coast north of Cape Town, other good sites for all the coastal specials are the village of Yzerfontein, and the Tsarsbank picnic site in the West Coast

National Park. Damara Tern *Sterna balaenarum*, a superb southern African endemic, breeds in tiny numbers in the De Mond Nature Reserve, near Cape Agulhas. A few are often present around the reserve's estuary mouth, although the colony itself is situated in dune slacks some 9 km to the west.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Mike Fraser, John Graham, Anne Gray, Trevor Hardaker, Rob Leslie, Peter Ryan and Ian Sinclair for assisting with pelagic trips and seabirding information, and wish to thank Bruce Dyer, Peter Ryan and Ross Wanless for kindly supplying photographs. Pippa Parker of Struik Publishers gave permission to partially reproduce text in this article from *Essential Birding—Western South Africa: Key Routes from Cape Town to the Kalahari* (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, 2000), which is reviewed on pp.69–70. ♀

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^aPercy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, Republic of South Africa. E-mail: callan@birding-africa.com

^b4 Almeria Road, Meadowridge 7800, Republic of South Africa.